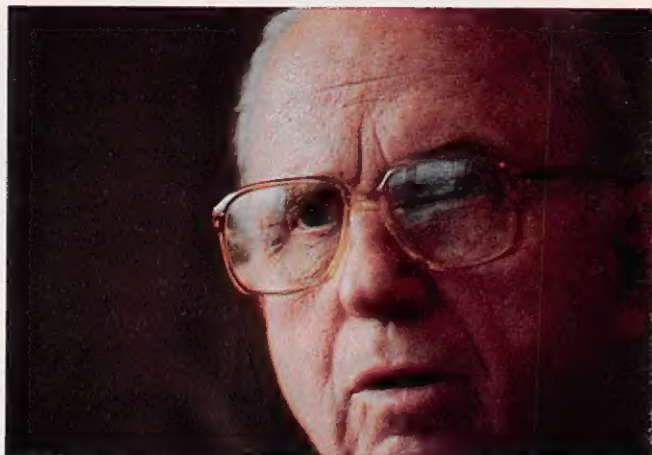


A spelunker in the caves of history

JAMES MICHENER



PHOTOS: DAVID E. KENNEDY/BLACK STAR

By William Ecenbarger

The lobby of the hotel just outside Washington, D.C., is teeming with purposeful, name-tagged men and women awaiting the beginning of the afternoon convention schedule. Outside, motorists are locking horns on the busy street, and a taxi breaks free and sprints to the hotel entrance. A man in a rumpled blue suit emerges, fumbles for the fare and steps through the door. He is bespectacled and looks like a college professor, which he once was. He carries a small overnight bag and is not wearing a name tag. He walks, with an almost imperceptible limp, to the registration desk and hands a piece of paper to the clerk, who advises him, "Your room is ready, Mr. 'Mikener.'" America's most popular serious novelist eschews an offer to carry his bag and walks to the elevator alone. None of the crowd in the lobby has noticed him.

Later, James Albert Michener (MITCH-ner) shrugs off his suit coat, squeaks into a leather chair, and responds to the first question: "No, I'm never noticed anywhere. I even did one of those American Express commercials because of it. I guess when you look at it objectively,

there are at least 30 countries in which it is better to be a writer than the United States. The best are Russia, France, Germany and China. They revere their writers. America is still a frontier country that almost shudders at the idea of creative expression."

Michener has come to Washington for a meeting of a national commission studying the problems of UNESCO. It is one of three such groups of which he is now a member. Over the past decade he has served on the boards of a dozen prestigious organizations, including the advisory board of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration while he was writing his 1982 novel *Space*.

"If you last into your 70s, you get a lot of breaks that you're really not entitled to. Almost every week I'm invited to participate in something at a level at which young men just don't get asked. These meetings are very intense and real, and just being around a lot of brilliant people keeps me young. I should have to pay to attend them." Michener's voice is resonant, and his words roll through the room like organ notes through a cathedral.

For the past two years he has been living and working in Austin, Texas, writing a novel about the state. The seven-day-a-week Michener routine, which he follows with the persistence of gravity, has him rise at 7:30 A.M., drink a glass of grapefruit juice, which he calls battery acid, and within five minutes be at his desk and typing with two fingers until about 12:30, when he usually has completed six pages. He never works in the afternoon and works only two or three evenings a month. *Texas* should be out this fall.

Michener was 40 years old before he settled on a literary career, but in the 37 years since then he has written 33 books that have sold 21 million copies, been translated into 52 languages, inspired 12 films and one smash Broadway musical. All but a few of his books are still in print and readily available. The popularity of such novels as *The Bridges at Toko-ri*, *Hawaii*, *The Source*, *Chesapeake* and *Centennial* have made him America's most popular serious novelist—a distinction he views with considerable humility.

"I am frequently approached by people who tell me that they enjoy



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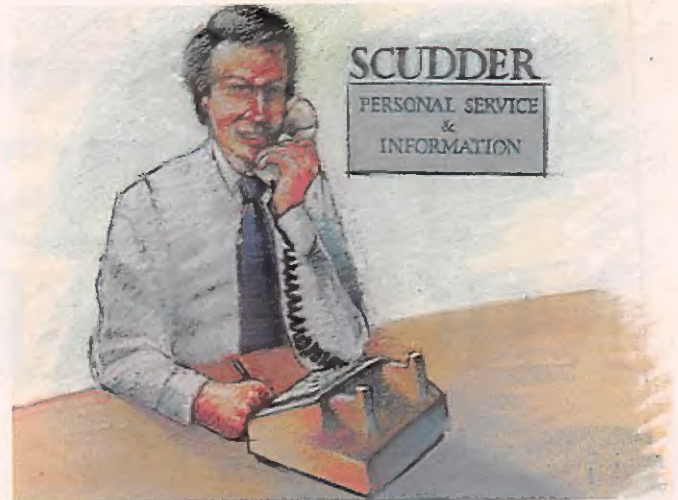
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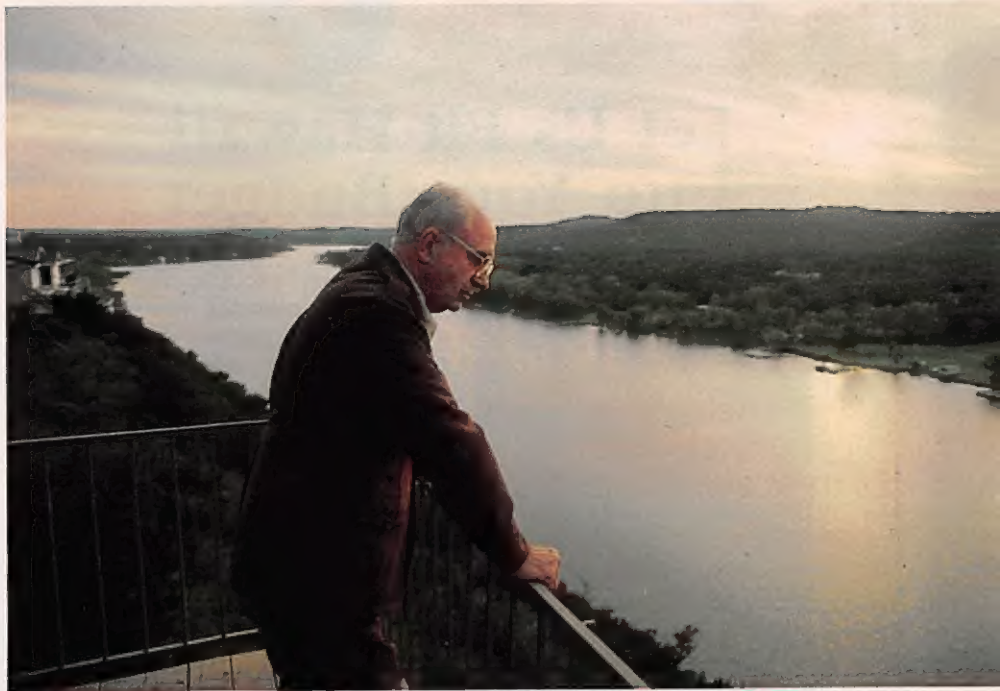
"my" books, especially *Mister Roberts* and *From Here to Eternity*," he says, his mouth forming a crescent of pleasure.

While Michener, in keeping with a longstanding practice, will not discuss the content of his new novel, there are threads running through his previous fiction that are not likely to be absent here. His women are strong, resourceful, independent. There is a great deal of scholarly instruction for the reader. And nearly every Michener book deals at least once with interracial or intercultural marriage. The central theme of Michener's work is the destructiveness of injustice and prejudice—a subject that he, making a temple of his fingers, is willing to discuss.

"When you grow up at the bottom of the totem pole, you see things in a different perspective, and with me there's the circumstance of my birth." His eyes crinkle sagely. "If I really don't know who I am, I can hardly look down on anyone. I seem to have a Germanic turn of mind, but I may be Jewish or Lithuanian or part black. With that uncertain background, one's attitude becomes quite tolerant very early."

Michener is not the real name of the man who created Bali-ha'i and Bloody Mary—it's the name of the woman who found him on her doorstep in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, and adopted him.

"I've been led to believe for various reasons that I was born somewhere near Mount Vernon, New York. There's never been any doubt that the year was 1907 because I turned up almost immediately in Pennsylvania. It was a matter of weeks." Two extensive investigations into Michener's origins—one by the State Department when he applied for a passport, the other by the U.S. Navy when he was commissioned—failed to solve the mystery of his biological origins. He does not know for



World-traveler Michener spends reflective time at his Lake Austin, Texas, home.

sure where or exactly when he was born, and he has no idea who his natural parents are.

Mabel Michener was a widow when she took in the waif she named James Albert. She had one son of her own and raised five or six other children at various times. She scratched out a living as a laundress and seamstress, but when times were bad, as they often were, young Jim had to weather the storm in the Bucks County Poorhouse.

"My mother did absolutely back-breaking, sweatshop labor, but there were still times when we had nothing. Zero! Money was absolutely all-important to me when I was young, simply because I never had any. This tightens you inside. I've had one success after another, but don't forget that it came very late. I have a very hard inner consciousness. I'm tougher inside than people think."

The chance adoption by Mabel Michener was fortuitous for a future writer because she loved literature, especially Dickens, and she read aloud from the classics to her children nearly every night. "It was an absolutely formative part of my life," Michener recalls. "I remember it most vividly today. We would all gather around and she would read from *Oliver Twist* or *David*

Copperfield. From this I learned that there were certain conventions to use to make things happen and move the narrative along."

Michener began reading himself at an early age. At 14, he chanced upon an issue of *National Geographic*—and was instantly beset by a thirst for travel that he has never managed to slake. By the time he finished high school in 1925, young Michener had visited 45 of the then 48 states—mostly by hitchhiking.

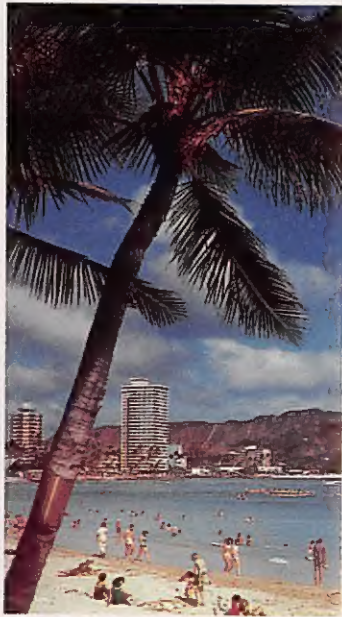
"I usually got a ride within 15 minutes. I was young and had a lot of blond hair and kept myself neat. I could always find someone to feed me and bed me down for the night, and I had no hesitation whatever about leaving for a month with 85 cents in my pocket. The whole experience left me very optimistic about the human race."

Today Michener is probably the most traveled writer in history. He estimates he has been to Singapore 50 times, Burma 20 times and Bora Bora eight times. He has lived and worked for extended periods in Afghanistan, Australia, Fiji, Hawaii, India, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Portugal, Samoa, Spain, Tahiti, Thailand and Vienna. Where hasn't he been?

"I have never gotten to Machu
continued



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Picchu, and I should have gone there when I was younger because I think it's too high for me now. I've never been to the South Pole, and that irritates me, too."

A dazzling academic high school record won Michener the first full four-year scholarship ever awarded by Swarthmore College, where he graduated *summa cum laude* in 1929. He spent the next decade traveling, teaching and studying at nine universities in the United States and Europe. He volunteered for the U.S. Navy in 1942 and was assigned to the South Pacific, where as an island-hopping aircraft maintenance officer he was given wide latitude, partly because it was sometimes assumed that he was related to an admiral named Mitscher—an impression he did nothing to clarify. He came to know the area intimately, and on lonely afternoons at a cacao plantation on the island of Espiritu Santo, he began plotting a novel. At night he battled mosquitoes and humidity in an abandoned building and typed his material. He completed *Tales of the South Pacific* after his discharge. It was not and never has been a bestseller, but it won the 1947 Pulitzer Prize and came to the attention of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, who transformed it into a Broadway musical with staggering success.

Unfortunately, Mabel Michener never was able to enjoy James's literary rewards. She died on March 22, 1946, while he was still in the South Pacific, 11 months before publication of his first novel.

Michener has been a short-change artist at an amusement park in Pennsylvania, arrested for vagrancy in Georgia, shipped out on a Mediterranean coal vessel as a chart boy, acted in a Chautauqua tent company, worked as a fortune teller under the name Mitch the Witch, studied painting in Italy, collected rare

songs in the Hebrides, smoked opium in Phnom Penh and sailed from Honolulu to Los Angeles in a small boat. He has had his nose broken three times in brawls, has survived three plane crashes, three marriages, two divorces and one serious heart attack.

But experience, he says, isn't that important to a writer. "Most of what I've written about I've never experienced. What experience can do for you is trigger your imagination, but good writing depends on vivid imagination, not vivid experience. Shakespeare wrote of murder as profoundly as any man who ever lived, yet it seems doubtful that he ever committed a murder."

Michener is a spelunker in the caves of history. In researching a novel he consults 300 to 400 books—but rarely takes notes. He not only retains all the material in his flypaper memory, he remembers by book and by page exactly where to find it. Occasionally he will jot down a page number in the back of the book.

"When I attack a subject, first I do the geography, then the history, then the literature and finally the music. Right now you'll find a dozen tapes in my office back in Texas with music, compiled by me, of Civil War songs, songs of the range, Mexican music and country-and-western stuff. I play them over and over.

"People think I have always had a large research staff, but the truth is that all of my big books have been written with my doing all the research myself. When I'm done I circulate the manuscript widely and ask for checks for accuracy and suggestions. At one point the manuscript of *The Covenant* was on five different continents.

"Right now I have 28 or 29 great ideas for books, at least half of which would turn out to be not so great upon closer examination.

"I will never retire, but I feel very

strongly—stronger than ever I did—that people ought to retire from the management of institutions, whether it's an art museum or a Buick agency, at 57 or 58—just because of the physical weakening and declining enthusiasm. Having said that, I hasten to add that such people ought to be kept around because they are

enormously valuable to their successors. I've never been bored, and I can't imagine that I ever will be.

"What would I do if I retired? Probably pick some subject I was interested in and read all about it. That's exactly what I'm doing—and I'm getting paid phenomenally well for doing it."

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Fun fare

Solutions are on page 99

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Labor daze

"A rose by any other name . . ." applies to more than flowers. Following are some seldom-heard words for some well-known professions. Can you sort them out?

1. Is an **amanuensis** (a) a sailor, (b) a secretary, or (c) a songwriter?
2. Is an **apothecary** (a) a pharmacist, (b) a photographer, or (c) a physicist?
3. Is a **bursar** (a) a timekeeper, (b) a translator, or (c) a treasurer?
4. Is a **coryphée** (a) a dancer, (b) a dealer, or (c) a doctor?

5. Is a **factotum** (a) a hairdresser, (b) a handyman, or (c) a historian?
6. Is a **fugleman** (a) a machinist, (b) a magician, or (c) a manager?
7. Is a **limner** (a) a painter, (b) a politician, or (c) a botanist?
8. Is a **preceptor** (a) a tailor, (b) a taxidermist, or (c) a teacher?
9. Is a **redactor** (a) an editor, (b) an engineer, or (c) an exterminator?
10. Is a **tapster** (a) a barber, (b) a bartender, or (c) a botanist?

Back to school— but where?

Study at the school of your choice—but first unscramble the names of these 10 American colleges.

1. BLANDTRIVE
2. CRINTOPEN
3. DOCTICLEAN
4. DRISBANE
5. LABORY
6. MONSCEL
7. NAUTLE
8. ONDRAFTS
9. STRONNERTHEW
10. TRUTHOMAD



Bon voyage!

Be a world traveler without leaving the United States by finding these 10 cities right here at home. But in what states?

1. You can skip Greece and visit Athens in —?
2. You can skip Jordan and visit Bethlehem in —?
3. You can skip Egypt and visit Cairo in —?
4. You can skip England and visit Lancaster in —?
5. You can skip Spain and visit Madrid in —?
6. You can skip Russia and visit Moscow in —?
7. You can skip France and visit Paris in —?
8. You can skip India and visit Salem in —?
9. You can skip Germany and visit Stuttgart in —?
10. You can skip Scotland and visit Glasgow in —?

Artists of August

We've supplied the birth month and date of each August-born creative giant; all you need do is match each with his/her birth year.

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 1. Ernie Pyle, August 3 | a. 1749 |
| 2. Percy Bysshe Shelley, August 4 | b. 1771 |
| 3. Guy de Maupassant, August 5 | c. 1792 |
| 4. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, August 6 | d. 1809 |
| 5. Sara Teasdale, August 8 | e. 1828 |
| 6. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, August 8 | f. 1850 |
| 7. Carrie Jacobs Bond, August 11 | g. 1862 |
| 8. Sir Walter Scott, August 15 | h. 1884 |
| 9. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, August 28 | i. 1896 |
| 10. Leo Tolstoy, August 28 (Julian calendar) | j. 1900 |